

Title: The Ostromir Gospel

Date: 1056-1057

Geography: Most likely place of production is Kyiv, though donated to Novgorod's Holy Sophia Church

Culture: Rus

Medium: Parchment. Ink, cinnabar, colours, gold.

Dimensions: 355mm x 290mm. 294 leaves.

Current Institution: National Library of Russia

Link to object: The Ostromir Gospel is available via:

<https://vivaldi.nlr.ru/bc000000414/view/#page=> [last accessed 16th August 2024]

There is also a project devoted to it at the National Library of Russia:

<https://expositions.nlr.ru/facsimile/OstromirGospel/RA5254/o-proekte> [last accessed 16th August 2024]



Fig. 1. Illumination of St. Luke, fol. 87v. Image in the Public Domain

alt=" Manuscript illumination of the Evangelist St. Luke”

Keywords: Rus, Manuscripts, Illuminations, Kyiv, Gospel book, Evangelists

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The Ostromir Gospel is the earliest dated gospel book to survive from the kingdom of Rus. It was most likely produced in the middle of the eleventh century in a Kyivan workshop, perhaps the one that also produced the Russian component of the Codex Gertrudianus. The colophon to the Gospel states that it was written by Deacon Gregory between October 21, 1056 and May 12, 1057 and is dedicated to Ostromir the mayor (*posadnik*) of Novgorod who was appointed by the Russian king Iziaslav Iaroslavich. After its creation, the Gospel book was placed in the Church of Holy Sophia in Novgorod where it remained for a number of years. It is of great interest that this codex was produced not for a member of the ruling clan, but for one of the mayors of Novgorod and much work has been done to attempt to understand why this was the case. Russian scholars, in particular, have suggested that Ostromir was married to a daughter of Volodimer Sviatoslavich and Anna *Porphyrogenita*, though no reference to such a daughter exists in the documentary record.

The text of the gospel includes the Gospel lections, the Sunday Gospel service, Gospel readings for special occasions, the Twelve Passion Gospels, and a collection (*synaxarion*) of saints’ lives. It is commonly believed that, while the text was produced in Kyiv, it was based upon a Bulgarian copy of a Greek work. The saints’ lives are of particular interest as they include saints not typically associated with Byzantine worship and thus call into question the faithful reproduction in Russian circles of the content of a menologion directly from Byzantium, or even of a Bulgarian intermediary reflecting the Byzantine tradition. The Feast of St. Apollinarius, for example, is listed on July 23. This saint was rarely included in Byzantine menologia, but was quite popular in Rome and western Frankia. The Gospel also is incorrect in calling him an archbishop when he was actually a bishop—an error that perhaps indicates oral, rather than textual, transmission. Similarly, the Feast of St. Vitus is included in the collection, though he rarely appears in Byzantine menologia before the thirteenth century and was venerated largely in Frankish contexts. He was a saint brought to prominence by Charlemagne who translated his relics to Corvee. The foundation of the Sazava monastery in Bohemia helped to popularize his cult, and it is likely that this monastery was the origin of the worship of St. Vitus in Rus.

The manuscript contains three full-page illuminations—each of which depicts one of the Gospel writers—and a series of illuminated initials. The illuminations reflect the Kyivan style of the period, which was heavily indebted to the imagery and color of the cloisonné enamel that was also popular at this time. Bright golds and blues in particular are characteristic of the Kyivan workshop style and can be seen in other manuscripts of the period as well. Another characteristic feature of the Kyivan workshop style is a blending of Byzantine and Western decorative motifs. The illuminated initials, for instance, use zoomorphic and anthropomorphic elements that are not typical for contemporary Byzantine manuscripts, but are common in Latin ones—and would later become a key decorative feature of Romanesque architecture. The images of the Gospel

writers as well each contain the Hieronymic symbol for the writer. This symbolic system was created by St. Jerome and matched a Gospel writer with an animal (Matthew--man, Mark--lion, Luke--calf, and John--eagle). These symbols were rare in Byzantine art and when used, did not always follow the system laid out by St. Jerome.

The Ostromir Gospel has been considered indicative of Russian artistic production of this period. One of the main examples of its impact as a model concerns the early twelfth century Mstislav's Lectionary. The illuminations of the Gospel writers in the Lectionary show a clear influence from the Ostromir Gospel—or potentially from a shared original exemplar although this seems less likely. Less commonly linked by scholars to the Ostromir Gospel is the Codex Gertrudianus, which was a Latin text brought to Rus in the mid-eleventh century by Gertrude, wife of King Iziaslav. Gertrude added text and illuminations in Kyiv and these additions are consistent in appearance with the work of the Kyivan workshop that produced the Ostromir Gospel. Adducing a second example alongside Ostromir helps to articulate the ways that Russian artisans used and appropriated designs and models to make their own style.

Biography

Christian Raffensperger is the Kenneth E. Wray Chair in the Humanities at Wittenberg University and a scholar of medieval eastern Europe. His most recent books include Rulers and Rulership in the Arc of Medieval Europe (Routledge, 2023) and Name Unknown: The Life of a Russian Queen (Routledge 2024).

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